

**Testimony of Wendy Lecker
in Opposition to Raised Bill 5551
March 7, 2016**

Dear Members of the Education Committee:

I am a taxpayer in Stamford who has been a public school parent for the past 17 years (and counting). I recently ended my last term on Westhill High School's school governance council, having served on it for four years. I am also senior attorney at the Education Law Center, where my work centers on education equity, including school funding, desegregation and other vital education issues. In addition, I am the education columnist for Hearst Connecticut Media Group. I have been working on school equity and school quality issues for the past 13 years and, as such am familiar with the research on school improvement.

I respectfully urge you to oppose Raised Bill 5551.

Raised Bill 5551 is a power grab by the Education Commissioner that will do nothing to improve schools. It is simply an attack on local control of schools.

The bill grossly expands the Commissioner of Education's powers under the Commissioner's Network. It removes any time limit on Commissioner's Network Schools. It removes the cap on how many Commissioner's Network schools can be taken over by the state. It removes the right of the local community to appoint their own turnaround committee. It eliminates the requirement that local parents, through their school governance council are included in the process. It allows the turnaround committee handpicked by the commissioner to "suspend laws."

This plan contravenes all the evidence on state takeovers.

State takeovers of schools and districts have been an **object failure** across the country.

In Newark and Paterson, New Jersey, where state takeover has been in effect for years, the districts are plagued by fiscal crises, lack of improvement in student outcomes and charges of mismanagement.

A recent report issued by the Center for Popular Democracy found that state takeovers in New Orleans, Michigan's Education Achievement Authority, and Tennessee's Achievement School District, have all been plagued by mismanagement, instability and high turnover and hiring of inexperienced teachers, and virtually no student improvement.

<https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/National%20Takeover%20Ed%20Report.pdf>

In fact, even the federal government has found that states do not have the expertise to successfully turn around low-performing schools. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/most-states-lacked-expertise-to-improve-worst-schools/2015/05/05/0eb82b98-f35f-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9_story.html

Connecticut's track record on taking over schools is anything but stellar. In fact, one of the first Commissioner's Network school, handed over to JumoKE/FUSE failed miserably under the supposed watchful eye of the Commissioner and State Board of Education. The charter network admitted it was "winging it," hiring ex-convicts, mismanaging funds and allowing student test scores to drop precipitously. Even the current principal, Karen Lott, admitted that the takeover was a failure, with only 13% of Milner's students scoring proficient in Language Arts and a shocking 7% in Math. Lott declared that what the school needed was experienced staff, additional resources and community support, particularly wrap-around social services. <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/Wendy-Lecker-Failure-as-a-model-for-Connecticut-6267220.php>.

None of these inputs require state takeover. In fact, takeovers have been characterized by hiring inexperienced teachers, and disenfranchising the local community.

Where would such a disproven and anti-democratic idea come from?

This bill is virtually a carbon copy of ConnCAN's proposal for the Commissioner's Network schools. <http://webiva-downton.s3.amazonaws.com/696/7c/c/2766/255496644-ConnCAN-Turnaround-Report.pdf> ConnCAN cherry picked and misrepresented certain "case studies" and, as per usual, passed it off as "research."

For an example of ConnCAN's misrepresentation of its case studies, read the truth about Lawrence Massachusetts here. <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/Wendy-Lecker-The-collateral-damage-of-a-district-6295743.php>

ConnCAN not only wrote a proposal shockingly identical to this bill, the charter lobby also sponsored a "forum" for legislators in 2015 where it invited Ms. Lott of the failed Milner school and others, such as the deputy superintendent of Lawrence to speak to legislators.

However the true examples of following ConnCAN's prescription can be found in places like Detroit, where the emergency manager left under a cloud and Detroit's schools are on the brink of collapse, and in Tennessee where the superintendent, Chris Barbic, resigned, admitting turnaround was "much harder" than he thought.

Why would ConnCAN, the charter lobby, push this proposal?

Because state takeovers have been characterized by conversion of public schools into charter schools; schools unaccountable to elected boards, with little duty to report on its finances, yet who receive millions in public funds. Charters also tend to exclude a district's neediest children, without any accountability for these practices.

This is the second recent example of the Malloy administration ceding governmental tasks to ConnCAN. As I recently wrote, the Malloy administration allowed ConnCAN to choose at least one candidate for State Board of Education. <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/Wendy-Lecker-Malloy-Christie-on-similar-6870576.php>

Now, ConnCAN is writing legislation to determine the fate of our poorest schools. ConnCAN is a lobby for charter schools. The world outside Hartford recognizes ConnCAN as charlatan organization. It has received the Bunkum Award for shoddy research from the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado.

It is beyond troubling that our education policy is being set by this lobbying front group.

Without any evidence that destroying local control will help students (in fact with most evidence pointing the other way) why would we cede more power to the Commissioner?

Why do we think people who live and work in poor communities do not know what their children and schools need? As longtime teacher, professor and writer Mike Rose has written,

“We have a long-standing shameful tendency in America to attribute all sorts of pathologies to the poor... We seem willing to accept remedies for the poor that we are not willing to accept for anyone else.”

Our neighbors in our poorest communities know what their children need. Their teachers and principals and all the dedicated staff in their schools know, too. In fact, since early February they have been testifying, along with real national experts, in front of Judge Moukawsher in the CCJEF case about what their schools need to improve: smaller classes, more teachers, social workers, prek, wraparound services for kids and families, adequate facilities and more.

As Ms. Lott, Milner’s principal stated, struggling schools need money, a stable staff and community support. State takeover will not accomplish these goals.

What will?

Providing schools the supports Ms. Lott mentions; supports that have been proven to improve schools. https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Community-Schools-Layout_e.pdf

How do we provide these resources?

Several recent longitudinal studies prove that school finance reform where states substantially increase funding for struggling schools raises achievement.
http://eml.berkeley.edu/~jrothst/workingpapers/LRS_schoolfinance_feb2016.pdf;
<http://www.nber.org/papers/w20847>.

The legislature can truly impact student performance by settling the CCJEF case and enacting real finance reform to fund Connecticut schools adequately.

What the legislature should NOT do is replicate failure. And that is what Raised Bill 5551 will do.

Governor Malloy and his administration are apparently doing the bidding of ConnCAN and the rest of the charter industry.

It is the legislature's duty to act on behalf of the children in this state, on behalf of taxpayers, and on behalf of democracy.

Connecticut needs elected officials with integrity and clarity of vision to, once and for all, examine the evidence and protect the interests, not of high-priced lobbyists, but of those children most in need of protection.

I respectfully request that you reject this pointless assault on democracy and oppose Raised Bill 5551.

Thank you.

Wendy Lecker
Stamford